

RENEYING THE RENeyed: LANGUAGE PLAY, EYESIGHT,
AND SALVATION IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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In four B manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* the following lines of the Athlone edition are altered through scribal intervention:

For þouȝ a cristen man coueited his cristendom to reneye,
Riȝtfully to reneye no reson it wolde.
For may no cherl chartre make ne his chatel selle
Wiþouten leue of his lord; no lawe wol it graunte.
Ac he may renne in arerage and rome fro home,
As a reneyed caytif recchelesly rennen aboute.
(B.11.125-30)¹

Of the seemingly inevitable changes apt to occur in any manuscript copy, alterations around the word *reneye*, which is used three times in quick succession in the passage, stand out.² That this word posed some difficulty to certain copyists might simply be dismissed by a critic as yet more evidence for scribal incompetence or it might spur a textual historian into investigation of why this passage caught such scribal intervention, but the fact that certain medieval professional readers stumbled over this word can also act as a cue for professional readers in the twenty-first century to look more closely, without prejudice as to its evident meaning, at a passage whose critical significance has been overwhelmed by interest in what precedes it and in what follows it, namely Scripture's ominous Wedding Feast parable in which *pauci* will be saved (11.112-14), and the problematic case of Trajan (11.140-53) which supports in part the Dreamer's own hope voiced in the middle that all, including himself, can be saved.³ The three close repetitions of *reneye*, the only occasion the word is used in the poem, are literally stuck between two dramatically different answers to the questions of who will be saved and how.

From the vantage point of passus 11 in B, Langland does not seem to be engaged in anything unusual at 11.125-30, and the message does indeed appear to be straightforward. *Reneye* in Langland's context means *renounce*, its C-text spelling *renoye* deriving from the Old French *renoiier* (*MED*, "reneien"). Its appearance in the text is

deliberately shocking, since it is provocative to even suggest that a Christian might conceive of renouncing the one true faith. The reneyed caitiff has tried to break a legal contract with God and deserves therefore to be cast into prison. The word also builds on some immediate language play within passus 11, as it counterbalances the similar-sounding, but semantically-opposite Latin participle *renatus* used by the Dreamer a few lines earlier: “Ac a barn wiþouten bapteme may noȝt be saued: / *Nisi quis renatus fuerit*” (B.11.82-82a). *Renatus* means *reborn*, and hence in passus 11 Langland seems to be inviting us simply to consider the salvational difference between standing *reneyed* or standing *renatus* before God.⁴

From the later vantage point of passus 18, however, our perspective on what Langland had been up to in passus 11 must readjust as it is revealed that a far more complex textual situation had been in play. From the point of view of the later passus, we can see that Langland already in passus 11 was laying the groundwork for the redemptive action of passus 18. One overlooked element in this preparatory action is the delicate language play around the polysemous nature of *reneye* in 11.125-30, because there are two very different verbs in Middle English with that spelling. *Reneye*, as it turns out, figuratively resolves in the text the very problem that it identifies. The more common verb of the two is the one in immediate linguistic play in the foreground of passus 11—to renounce, forsake, recant—the citation of which in the *Middle English Dictionary* takes up approximately one and a half columns of space. However, the second verb lurking in the background has a definition which parallels that of the Latin participle *renatus* at 11.82a: “reneien v.(2) [From OF *neier*, var. of *noier* to purify.] To cleanse (sb.) spiritually; also, wash away (soreness of eyes). (a1333) Shoreham *Poems* 8/207: þer-fore ine wine me ne may, Inne siþere, ne inne pereye, Ne ine þing þat neuere water nes þorȝ cristning man reneye. ?a1425(1373) *Lelamour *Macer* 1b: The oudour þere of reneyth the brenyng of the eyne” (*MED*, “reneien”). In passus 11, this second definition gains relevance in the background because of *reneye*’s aural and semantic closeness to the textually-present *renatus*, but its full significance must await the setting off of the trigger established in passus 11, which will bring its two figurative meanings, spiritual and medical, into the foreground in passus 18. Simply put, to adapt Langland’s own word play, the reneyed caitiff of passus 11 needs to be reneyed, a process of spiritual renewal which in *Piers Plowman* is elsewhere concretely identified with the restoration of eyesight. Only

the polysemous *reneye* is capable of executing this thematic play on language in which the forsaken are afforded the opportunity of redemption.

On a general level, the backgrounded medical aspect of the word *reneye*, which denotes a curative process in the treatment of sore eyes, enables Langland in passus 11 to anticipate however obliquely the later statement at 16.103-07 that Jesus is taught leechcraft by Piers, thereby tying the passage loosely into the poem's recurrent metaphor of Christ the Good Physician.⁵ But the leading figure in this process of reneying the reneyed is Longeus in passus 18, the character whose story brings forward the figurative definitions of *reneye* hidden beneath the surface since passus 11. Literally blind for many years, Longeus is made the equivalent of the reneyed caitiff from passus 11 by his Jewishness, Jews having been denounced by Faith in 18 as "caytyues, acorsed for euere" and "Cursede caytyues" (18.93, 96). *Caitiff*, emphasized twice in the passage, is the significant trigger word that excites the verbal memory: this noun has not appeared in the text since *reneyed caitiff* at 11.130, and it will appear once more only, again to describe someone who has renounced his faith.⁶ As the reneyed caitiff in passus 11 rejects his Lord, so the caitiff Jews reject Christ. Longeus too renounces him in the violent act of desecration perpetrated upon the divine body in death. No more than does the reneyed caitiff of passus 11, Longeus in 18 does not deserve to be reneyed; nonetheless he is cured of eye disease, literal and figurative, when the blood of Christ "sprong down by þe spere and vnspereð his eizen" (18.86). Although the verb *reneye* is not itself reused in the text, its backgrounded figurative meanings, spiritual cleansing and treatment of eye disease, do surface when their trigger noun *caitiff* reappears and Longeus is reneyed through baptism into the Christian faith. The action upon the body of Longeus may seem obvious, the connection of spiritual conversion with restored eyesight trite at first glance, but to leap to such quick assumption misses much of what Langland is doing between the two passus. The two episodes, their characters, words, and meanings, are structurally locked together by tight semantic bonds and must be read together.

Indeed, the case of Longeus is not the first instance in the poem where the actions of a figure from above have saved one in a dire circumstance below. Other triggers also strongly connect the words, characters, and actions of passus 11 and 18. As Pope Gregory on earth saves Trajan in hell below by interceding for his release, so Christ hanging on the cross above rescues Longeus on the ground below by

opening his eyes.⁷ Quick on the heels of Longeus's baptismal-like reneying of his eyes follows the Harrowing of Hell, also in passus 18, in which Christ does not ask to let the righteous out, he goes down to get them out himself. The order of the interventions is unchronological by historical time, but entirely satisfying in the poem's dramatic buildup to the climactic story of the Redemption in passus 18.

The concatenations between the salvational movements of passus 11 and 18 are indeed considerable. Just as the Dreamer wakes up to the woeful reality of human sinfulness at the end of passus 11 when Reason rebukes him, so too Longeus weeps in woeful recognition of what he has been forced to do. As Christendom "gan sprynge" out of Christ's body to make us all bloody bretheren in passus 11 (201-02), so too Christ's blood "sprong doun" the spear and into the eyes of Longeus in passus 18. Longeus's contrast with Trajan is especially noticeable. Trajan in passus 11 is the pagan Roman emperor rescued from hell by the intercession of Pope Gregory. Barely acknowledging the instrumental role of the one who saved him, Trajan takes much of the credit for his own salvation through his many acts of "leaute," although we should note that this abundance of virtuous deeds was not enough to gain him entry into heaven when he died:⁸

Wiþouten bede biddynge his boone was vnderfongen
And I saued as ye may see, wiþouten syngynge of masses,
By loue and by lernynge of my lyuynge in truþe. . . .
(11.150-52)

Aers points out the "striking lack of humility" in Trajan's speech and also his multiple and self-centered use of the first person singular (126 and 218n102). Trajan's logic, moreover, is peculiar and self-serving: Is Gregory's boon asked of God to release Trajan from hell somehow not to be considered a prayer?⁹ Is Trajan suggesting that God was in the wrong for sending the righteous Trajan to hell in the first place?

Longeus in passus 18 on the other hand has no store of virtuous deeds to justify himself, and perversely it is one foul and villainous act—the mutilation of a corpse—that brings him the potential of redemption. He likewise models a very different response to being saved by the divine agency of Christ:

Thanne fil þe knyȝt vpon knees and cryde Iesu mercy:
"Ayein my wille it was, lord, to wownde yow so soore."

He sighed and seide, “soore it me abyneþ!
 For þe dede þat I haue doon I do me in youre grace.
 Haue on me ruþe, riȝtful Iesu;” and riȝt wiþ þat he wepte.
 (18.87-91)

Longeus immediately acknowledges the force that has healed him. His language and actions are emotive—*fil . . . vpon knees, cryde . . . mercy, sighed, soore . . . abyneþ, haue . . . ruþe, and wepte*—and even accepting of blame and punishment for actions that were not entirely his fault. It is perhaps significant as well that most B-text manuscripts—W Hm Cr G Y O C² C B L M R F—and also several C text manuscripts—N² D² T H² Ch R M W—do not in fact identify Longeus as “þis blynde Iew” but remain silent as to his ethnicity. Few early readers of *Piers*, that is, would have been positioned to recognize that the blindfolding of the synagogue occurs at the very same moment the eyes of Longeus the Jew are opened, as Derek Pearsall suggests,¹⁰ but these early readers may well instead have noticed the contrast between the response of a Roman emperor and that of a Roman soldier (albeit one still closely associated with the Jews). Longeus after all, is a Latin name, and the character’s origins are in the Roman soldier who thrusts his spear into the side of Christ, according to John 19:34.¹¹

Passus 11 in sum is an anticipatory and largely unsuccessful attempt at the redemptive action of passus 18, with the ambivalent question of what it means to be a *reneyed* Christian, renounced or *renatus*, sore of eye or sound, acting as the fulcrum point upon which two contrasting concepts of salvation—the few or the all—balance. Passus 11 leaves the two split apart. The Dreamer attempts at B.11.118-124a to contradict Scripture’s *pauci* with the argument that he merits entry into heaven just for being baptized by the choice and action of his parents, as if his own actions and choices in life do not matter. Trajan’s case likewise might seem to contradict Scripture. Passus 18, on the other hand, brings together the two opposing points of view through the debate and subsequent reconciliation of the Four Daughters of God and through the suggestive promise of Universal Salvation at the end of time.¹²

The overlooked importance of the word *reneye* in passus 11 and its backgrounded semantic anticipation of the baptismal-like reneying of Longeus’s eyes in passus 18 further suggest that, in light of Langland’s greater discourse on salvation, a closer examination of the poem’s treatment of the eye, eyesight, and language games is in order, for it

may not be so obvious and trite after all. The curing of Longeus's blindness in fact is far from being the sole case of such miraculous ocular intervention in the text: Jesus cures the blind as part of his ministry on earth, as mentioned at 16.108, 16.124, and 19.125. Another character in the text with the capacity to "cure" blindness is Hunger, who soon persuades those faking illness to get back to work: "Blynde and bedreden were bootned a þousand; / That seten to begge siluer soone were þei heeled" (6.191-92). Blindness in the Middle Ages was surely one of the most feared¹³ of disabilities¹⁴ because in most circumstances it rendered its victim quite helpless and dependent upon the good will of others for safety and support of livelihood.¹⁵ In the absence of such good will, the blind were easily subject to cruel pranks and general suspicion as to the genuine nature of their affliction. In this negative vein, *Imaginatif* uses the contrast between sightedness and blindness metaphorically, language play in itself, to demonstrate the superior efficacy of learning over *lewedness* in the pursuit of salvation.

And riȝt as siȝt serueþ a man to se þe heiȝe strete
 Riȝt so lereþ lettrure lewed men to Reson.
 And as a blynd man in bataille bereþ wepne to fiȝte
 And haþ noon hap wiþ his ax his enemy to hitte,
 Na moore kan a kynde witted man, but clerkes hym teche,
 Come for al his kynde wit to cristendom and be saued....
 (12.103-08)

Obviously the two states of vision possess strong allegorical associations: one can either see—Book, the wight with two broad eyes (18.230)—or one cannot see—*dum cecus ducit cecum ambo in foueam cadunt* (10.281a, 12.185), irresponsible clergy said to be blind buzzards (10.272) and blind beacons (17.266), and Lucifer blinded by the light of Christ during the Harrowing of Hell (18.325). Blindness, that is, is ignorance, is incompetence, is perversity in self-centeredness. All such are reneyed caitiffs doomed to languish in the prison of hell. Sightedness in contrast is knowledge, ability, and self-awareness.

Yet the state of blindness itself is a polysemous sign and is often treated by Langland with strong positive associations.¹⁶ The blind after all are part of Langland's triad of God's minstrels together with the poor and bedridden:

For to solace youre soules swiche minstrales to haue:
The pouere for a fool sage sitting at þi table

.....
And a blynd man for a bourdeour, or a bedrede womman
To crie a largesse bifore oure lord, youre good loos to shewe.
Thise þre maner minstrales makeþ a man to lauþe,
And in his deep deyinge þei don hym gret confort.

(13.442-43, 447-50)

While these three disabled groups might seem to be the most disadvantaged and passive members of their society, Langland unexpectedly emphasizes their active engagement in the life of their community. Far from being reduced to mere passive receptacles of others' acts of charity and thereby pushed to the fringes of their society, the blind, poor, and bedridden sit at the dinner table as integral members of the group; like loyal retainers they advertize their patron's virtues to a greater lord; they raise the spirits of the group in life and they provide comfort to its dying members. They also help individuals of their community by giving them a provisional answer as to what sort of reneyed Christians they are before that same question is asked of them by God. Dame Studie in B thrice refers by name to an authoritative scriptural figure with a much better historical claim to being a blind Jew than Longeus: this is Tobias, whose teachings on charitable giving (10.33, 88, 90) and, in C, on the need for care to be exercised in determining the source of charitable donations (C.17.37-40a) prove that contrary to normative expectations, sometimes the blind can lead the way without disastrous consequence.¹⁷ Tobias, explicitly identified as blind in C at 17.38, like Longeus has his sight miraculously restored in the biblical account.¹⁸

If blindness is an ambiguous sign for salvific potential in *Piers Plowman*, paralleling in terms of eyesight both the good and bad aspects of *reneye*, the same is not true of other types of impaired vision in the poem, which are uniformly presented as negative in aspect. Notable in particular is the repeated mention of the eyes, often diseased in some manner, in the portraits of the Seven Deadly Sins in the confession scene of passus 5: Wrath has two white eyes (5.135), Coveitise's two eyes are "blered" (5.190), Gluttony's eyes are dimmed with drink (5.349) and his first act after waking is to wipe his eyes (5.361), and Sloth suffers from two slimy eyes (5.385). Envy, who endures multiple health problems related to his heart and stomach, may

not additionally suffer from literally impaired vision, but he certainly suffers from figuratively poor eyesight: he turns his eyes away from the altar in church, arguably depriving himself of the sight of the elevated eucharistic Host when he chooses to lust rather after the material possessions of others (5.110). While it may not be mentioned in passus 5, Lechery too has its familiar connection with eyesight first as noted in passus 2 in the “waityng with eizes” that goes on in the lordship of Lechery (2.90), and then again later in passus 13 in Haukyn’s reiteration of the confession scene in which his coat is quickly “soilled / Wiþ likynge of lecherie as by lokynge of his eize” (13.342-43). Most prominent of all, and perhaps substituting for the otherwise absent Pride, is the connection between the Dreamer and Coveitise-of-Eyes in passus 11 who follows Will for forty-five years, his entire adult life, a major clue as to the nature of his spiritual malaise (11.46-59). Dame Studie’s crude wish for those who suffer from the lust of the eyes is likewise expressed in terms of limited vision: “For alle þat wilneb to wite þe whyes of god almyȝty, / I wolde his eize were in his ers and his hele after” (10.127-28), an anatomical position from which it would be difficult, indeed, to see much of anything.

The mote-and-beam allusion to Matthew 7:3 cited by Clergie at 10.267-71 adds another element to the discourse of salvation built around literal and figurative eyesight through language play. Although called a case of blindness at 10.270 and its message then extended further at 10.272-84 to “blind buzzards”—clergy who renege their faith by failing to practice what they preach and who, in another biblical allusion to blindness, Matthew 15:14 at 10.281*a*, can only blindly lead the ignorant laity so that they both fall together into the pit of damnation—having a large piece of wood in the eye is not the same at all as experiencing blindness, and only language play—naming it blindness—makes it so. Because the sufferer can see very clearly the small speck in the other person’s eye, the near-sighted vision in question, which is more than acute enough when the target is someone else’s faults of character, becomes selective blindness under the circumstance of an uncritical self-reflective gaze. The mote-and-beam allusion therefore suggests Langland’s thematic connection between good eyesight and self-knowledge, the capacity for self-criticism, verbalizing qualities necessary for spiritual renewal. It also concretizes sin metaphorically as a foreign body which somehow lodges itself in the eye, possibly leading to symptoms of disease like a slothful discharge of slime that must be wiped away. The Samaritan’s example

of the three things that cause a man to flee his own home uses the same concrete figure of foreign irritants that get in the eyes:¹⁹ “smoke and smolder,” covetousness and unkindness, hurt the eyes and cause bleariness,²⁰ potentially even blindness, most definitely of the bad variation (17.329-30, 347-48).²¹

The cure for poor vision then, logically is the removal from the eye of the foreign object that is the cause of the problem.²² This is the process of reneying as backgrounded in passus 11 and as acted upon the eyes of Longeus in passus 18. The Sins’ diseases of the eye therefore are linked to another prominent set of eye references in *Piers*, the watery eyes necessary for the tears of repentance which, to follow the process of the specifically medical aspect of *reneye*, flush the irritant foreign matter out of the sore eye. As itself, the saving blood of Christ which runs down the spear and into the eyes of Longeus to reneye him, although foreign matter itself, functions as an eye wash that removes the cause of blindness as it infuses the saving presence of the divine into human flesh. By synecdoche, however, a second, complementary process of removal is being articulated: the “unspearing” blood represents the whole person of Christ, an agent capable of the manual action of pulling out or lifting off some sort of heavy obstruction). And once the foreign objects that skewer Longeus’s eyes shut are removed, he is able to weep and the cleansing tears of repentance quickly start to flow on their own. Hunger too causes at least the outward sign of repentance when he seizes and shakes Waster so hard that his eyes water (6.175).

At least one other reference to watering eyes is even more playfully sardonic than Hunger’s penitential effect. The very first use of the word *eizen* in the poem occurs in the B Prologue at line 74 where a pardoner “bonched” the lewed “with his breuet and blered hire eizen.”²³ *Blered* eyes are literally rheumy, watery eyes; hence the pardoner, on the surface, is doing exactly what any member of the clergy, especially one who is pretending to act as a priest in the assoiling of sin, is supposed to do: he inspires the people to cry. Yet in this case, of course, the tears that result from being hit hard on the head cause visual impairment in token that the lewed cannot see through their tears the danger to their salvation that the pardoner presents to them.

The final references to eyes and to contrition are likewise grimly playful in the interconnectedness of their language around penitential notions of vision. As part of the preparations for the siege of Unity under Conscience’s command,

Some þoruȝ bedes biddynge and some by pilgrymage
And oþer pryue penaunce, and somme þoruȝ penyes delynge.
And þanne wellede water for wikkede werkes
Egreliche ernynge out of mennes eighen.
Clenesse of þe comune and clerkes clene lyuyng
Made vnitee holy chirche in holynesse stonde.

(19.375-80)

This is the last occasion upon which the word *eighen* is used in the poem, and the water welling out of them has its usual penitentially-cleansing effect. Laity and clergy are both now clean, at least in the very short term, as Langland quickly moves on to the representative figures from each estate who refuse to abide by the dictates of Conscience's instruction. Then at the very end of the poem, a character who by nature should find it easy to bring forth tears is also described as being *clene*: Contrition, who has "clene foryeten to crye and to wepe / And wake for hise wikked werkes as he was wont to doone" (20.369-70). Although this time adverbial rather than adjectival, the polysemous character of *clene* is sufficient to draw Langland's parallel: Contrition's behavior at the end may be clean, but like the watery eyes of the "lewed" in the Prologue that denote the opposite of what they normally do in the poem, it is a bad reversal of cleanliness.

One curious feature of the diseased eye motif in *Piers* is that while it dominates as the consistent physical symptom of vice in the confession scene of passus 7, and while it points to the prominence of Coveitise-of-Eyes as a negative spiritual influence over Will, and while it also highlights those references to metaphorical blindness as an obstacle to salvation that recur throughout much of the text, poor eyesight is dropped as a motif in passus 20. Even though Contrition's eyes are missing in reference in passus 20, Will can see all too clearly what is about to happen to him when Kynde passes him by and Death approaches: "And as I seet in þis sorwe I sauȝ how kynde passede / And deep drogh neiȝ me; for drede gan I quake" (20.199-200). And Sloth and Pride likewise have no difficulty in spotting Unity's internal weakness when Contrition "clean forgets" who he is (20.373). Kynde's foragers in the battle against Antichrist include several chronic and debilitating diseases —

Feueres and Fluxes,
Coughes and Cardiacles, Crampes and toobaches,
Rewmes and Radegundes and roynouse scalles,
Biles and bocches and brennynge Agues,
Frenesies and foule yueles (20.81-85) —

but eye disease is not among them.²⁴ Ocular problems are absent also from the list of conditions that Elde inflicts upon the Dreamer in the aging process: baldness (20.184), deafness (20.190), loss of teeth (20.191), chronic pain and loss of mobility (“goutes” at 20.192), and impotence (20.195-98). Why might Langland have chosen to drop his carefully built motif of impaired eyesight in the concluding passus of the poem?

The answer lies in the allegorical significance built up through language around eyesight and salvation throughout the text. Although blindness may be treated as an ambiguous sign, like *reneye* denoting either a positive or a negative aspect, sightedness is more straightforward in its association with knowledge, ability, and self-awareness. If those with impaired vision *nesciunt seipsos*, as Scripture might say at the start of passus 11, those who can truly see are the ones with the ability to turn their gaze toward recognition of their own faults and toward acknowledgment of the glory of the divine. To baptize Longeus, Christ’s blood running down the spear need only have landed anywhere upon his person. Langland’s larger message depends, however, very much upon the precise figure of eyesight and therefore, perhaps, owes something to the specific notion of blood in the eyes that is found in both miraculous and medical cures of vision.²⁵ What made Longeus blind was not the physical impairment of his eyes, but the spiritual disability of not recognizing his Savior. This concept is figuratively represented by Longeus’s eyes being “speared” shut, as if the eyes themselves beneath the skewered eyelids remain whole and functional, awaiting the time when the lids will be “unspeared” and the skewers removed. Moreover, as Anima explains in passus 15,

Whan þe hye kyng of heuene sente his sone to erþe
Many myracles he wrouȝte men for to turne,
In ensaumple þat men sholde se by sadde reson
Men myȝte noȝt be sauēd but þoruȝ mercy and grace,
And þoruȝ penaunce and passion and parfit bileue.

(15.511-15)

“To see by sad reason” is rendered concretely in the case of Longeus, for whom the experiential proof of the miracle of his restored vision is all that his reason requires in order for him to see more largely the truth of Christian revelation. The scene is carefully balanced: the eyes of Christ close (18.59) almost at the same time as Longeus’s are opened (18.86); Longeus’s thrust of a spear is matched by the unspearing action²⁶ of Christ’s blood, which is soon followed by another positive act of undoing, the forcible unpinning of hell’s gates (18.319-22) as the triumphant Christ enters to Harrow Hell and bind Lucifer in chains (18.403).²⁷ And then quickly comes what we know must be the joyous opening of “þe wiket þat þe womman shette” (5.602) when the gates of heaven part to welcome home the Savior and the fellowship of the redeemed. Langland, however, does not narrate for us this marvelous unlocking of heaven’s gates, because the unspearing of Longeus’s eyes has already substituted for that act of opening. The expected trite conclusion turns out indeed to have a small role to play in Langland’s development of the theme: to see is to be saved.

It is thus necessary for Will to be able to see unimpaired in the final passus or else Langland risks implying that the Dreamer’s spiritual growth remains as incomplete as his vision is impaired, and that therefore the bad aspect of *reneyed* from passus 11 wins out in the end—the sinner Will would remain a *reneyed caitiff* alienated from God and thus doomed to languish forever in prison. But, for all the other physical woes of the aging body worn on the outer surface of his skin—scabs, pocks, pustules, parasitic infections, ulcers, abscesses, and swellings—that form a parallel between Will’s diseased skin and Haukyn’s filthy coat, by the fact that Will can see when he enters the Barn of Unity at 20.213, he, like Longeus in passus 18, has the potential to be *reneyed* in the positive sense—cleansed, sighted, and spiritually renewed.

Langland thus builds an intricate structure of ideas around language, salvation, eyes, and eyesight in *Piers Plowman*. That word *reneye*, which is caught between the two extremes of *pauci* and *all* in passus 11, and the full semantic relevance of which must await the contextualized viewpoint of the Longeus episode in passus 18, is key to leading us toward understanding Langland’s complex presentation of salvation through the vehicle of eyesight throughout his poem. Whomever we judge to be the speaker at 11.188, that character hits upon a profound truth when she says that Jesus Christ in heaven knows who we are “by oure kynde herte and castynge of oure eizen.” This

“knowing” language anticipates Anima’s confident assertion that he can gain entry into heaven at any time, no matter how late or how early he knocks at the door, because his “vois so is knowe” by those inside (15.20). Will’s relationship with the Coveitise of Eyes misleads him by suggesting that the accumulation of knowledge is needful—to know is what is important—but Anima and the speaker at 11.188 point out how shortsighted that vision is: one need not know everything or anything in order to be saved, one needs only to be known in heaven. We can choose, like Envy, to turn our eyes away from the eucharistic Host on display on the altar and toward the material desires of our worldly existence, or we can choose like Longeus to turn our tear-filled eyes up toward the cross of salvation. By our choice, God knows which of the two dictionary listings for *reneye* applies to us.

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Notes

¹ The equivalent lines, 12.60-65, in the Athlone C-text edition are the same as in the Athlone B passage quoted. However, in Schmidt's parallel-text edition the last line of C reads instead as: "As a recheles caytyf other reneyed, as hit semeth." Textual disagreements between the different versions and editions of *Piers Plowman* are, to say the least, rampant.

² Using the apparatus criticus of the *Piers* Athlone editions as reference, on *reneye* at line 125, Cot alters it to *renewe*, C to *forsake*, and RF to *receyue*; at line 126, Cot again switches to *renewe*, and F to *receyue* it; at line 130, *reneyed* is changed to *renneth* by R and *renne* by F. In C-text manuscripts, at 12.60 and 61, D² reads *renye* and Z, *rerney*. All further references to the text of *Piers Plowman* are taken from the Athlone *Piers Plowman: The B Version* edited by George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson or, when noted as a reference to the C-text, from the Athlone *Piers Plowman: The C Version* edited by George Russell and George Kane.

³ There is editorial disagreement as to where Trajan's speech ends. While Skeat, Kane and Donaldson, Kane and Russell, and Pearsall all conclude Trajan's speech at the end of B.11.153 (C.12.88), Schmidt extends it to the end of B.11.318. For Schmidt, the problem is that much of the speech after 11.153 drops the first person perspective and often seems at odds with Trajan's status. It is more than a bit rich, among other things, for a Roman emperor, even one reputed to be just, to be praising a life of poverty. For those who end the speech at 11.153, the problem centers on the resultant uncertainty as to who might be speaking for the remainder of the lines until 11.319 and how Trajan's interjection at 11.171 fits in. I am following Kane and Donaldson's editorial guidance in this study.

⁴ These two lines are not in the C version.

⁵ On medicine as both metaphor and literal practice in *Piers*, see Gasse. Langland demonstrates a strong layman's grasp of medical practice in the Middle Ages. He is careful, for instance, to ensure that his clerical practitioners do not overstep the bounds of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council's decree which forbade clergy from practicing any surgery which involved cutting or cauterizing (cf. Sire Penetrans in passus 20). It is entirely plausible therefore that a master wordsmith like Langland might have known that *reneye* had an applicable medical aspect upon which he could riff.

⁶ The last use is at 19.403 to describe the brewer who refuses to

obey the dictates of Conscience. The brewer, that is, is yet another figure in the text who reneys his faith. Prior to passus 11, the noun *caitiff* occurs at 5.198 to describe Coveitise. Structurally, of course, the reiteration of *caitiff* suggests connection.

⁷ As Schmidt points out, the action is baptismal: "Christ's life-blood was both actually sacrificial, a propitiatory offering for man's sin, and potentially sacramental, symbolizing man's release from sin through baptism" (219).

⁸ No consideration of Trajan in *Piers* can escape the question of semi-Pelagianism in the text. Ever since Adams's seminal article, most *Piers* critics have approached Langland's theology in that light. However, there have been several strong contrary arguments, including those of Rudd (175-84), Aers (84-131), and Minnis (54-59, 64).

⁹ The anonymous author of the 1438 translation of the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Gilte Legende*, certainly regards it as a prayer: a divine voice tells Gregory "I haue herde thi praier and foryeuen Troian" but also admonishes him, "hennes forward . . . praie for none that is dampned" (205). *The Gilte Legende* outlines several possible explanations for what happens to Trajan.

¹⁰ For Pearsall's observation, see the note to C.20.81 in the Pearsall edition of the C-text. On the medieval topos of the blindness of the Jews, see Wheatley's excellent discussion (63-89).

¹¹ The immediate justification for the revision of the line to "þis blynde Iew" is metrical. The name "Longinus" first is recorded in chapter 16 of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and his story is briefly told in *The Gilte Legende* (vol. 1, 212) in which his ethnicity is not mentioned, although because Pilate commands him, he would seem to be Roman. See the detailed note on Longeus provided by Stephen Barney in Vol. 5 of *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* (34-35). But see also Wheatley's more general discussion of Longinus (84-88). Langland's emphasis upon Longeus's nobility and innocence stands in marked contrast to what Wheatley observes is the French tradition, especially in drama, wherein Longinus is "straightforwardly malevolent and fully aware of the task that he is undertaking" (86). Throughout his book Wheatley demonstrates that profoundly different attitudes existed toward the blind in France and England.

¹² The concept of universal salvation had become considerably more restrictive since the fourth century when Gregory of Nyssa applied it even to the Devil. Some of the most important recent critical statements on universal salvation in *Piers* are those of Thomas Hill,

Nicholas Watson, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (358-83), and David Aers (115-19).

¹³ For instance, Wheatley cites the case of Gilles Le Muisit (1272-1353), abbot of Tournai, who became blind at the age of seventy-five and then had his eyesight partially restored after cataract surgery. According to Wheatley, “Gilles addresses the subject of blindness in some detail only *after* his successful cataract surgery, an indication of the shame that he feels about his impairment” (205). Wheatley goes on to comment about Gilles, “[I]t is unthinkable that a man of his importance would have suffered all of the degradations and deprivations that he associates with the blind in this poem [*Li Rigrasciemens*]. However, he had clearly internalized these negative representations, whether through secondhand experience, literary representations, or word of mouth” (209). Additionally, Singer points out that in the pseudo-Senecan *De remediis fortuitorum*, for instance, blindness is the eleventh of fifteen woes that Ratio attempts to counteract. In the most widely circulating version of this text, “eyesight is the only sense whose loss is specifically lamented, and the eyes are the only bodily organ named” (87).

¹⁴ I use this term in accord with the norms of disability studies, in which *impairment* refers to the physical condition and *disability* to the social, economic, and political disadvantages. One of the classic sources for the distinction is Metzler.

¹⁵ Not always, of course. Singer points out the examples of two blind poet-composers, Francesco Landini and Guillaume de Machaut, who reached the pinnacle of their profession. Singer also notes that the assumption of the blind possessing compensatory powers of hearing existed in the Middle Ages to the point that “Because of this perceived compensatory ability, the blind were often encouraged to become musical performers, and the blind minstrel became a stock figure in romance and farce” (“Compensation” 45). Moreover, the association of the musician-poet and blindness is a truly ancient one. There is, of course, Homer and his blind Phaeacian bard Demodocus in book 8 of *The Odyssey*. But Barasch points out that the figure of the socially-distinguished blind harpist appears as long ago as in ancient Egyptian tomb art (2). The traditional link between blindness and music likely explains, at least in part, Langland’s conceit of God’s minstrels.

¹⁶ On the classical tradition of blindness as a good state of being, see Kivistö’s short summary of sources (106-17). On the blind and attitudes toward blindness in antiquity and the early Christian world,

see also Barasch (7-65).

¹⁷ Although he is not noted as such in *Piers*, another blind authority figure in the poem is St. Francis of Assisi. The case of Francis well illustrates the anxiety that blindness could arouse in others. Wells discusses how Francis's blindness was dealt with by his biographers, who often adopted strategies of avoidance or mitigation: "In medieval Europe, sanctity was the prototypical 'idealization,' and Francis needed to be portrayed as realizing that ideal, with or without the incorporation of his *infirmetas oculorum*. Some biographers could successfully acknowledge the saint's compromised eyesight; those who could not resorted instead to silencing, simplifying, and/or marginalizing the real condition of his body, participating in a discourse that, while not '(ab)normalizing,' still can be appropriately described as 'disabling'" (69-70).

¹⁸ Tobias in *Piers* has attracted little critical attention. Pearsall in the notes to his C-text edition, for example, simply points out that in C Langland quotes the same verse, Tob. 3:6, three times (280n40a). Schmidt in the explanatory notes to his *Parallel-Text* edition of *Piers* suggests that Tobias and his son (also Tobias) are used by Langland as "models of household piety" for the nobility (vol. 2 584).

¹⁹ Everyday dangers to eyesight from such foreign bodies were real, especially for certain lines of work. See the outline of occupational eye hazards in O'Tool's article on the blind residents of the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts (19-23).

²⁰ Note that covetousness is also linked specifically to bleary eyes in the confession scene at 5.190.

²¹ Practical information on eye health in the Middle Ages regularly emphasized the importance of preventing irritants from getting into the eyes. See, for instance, the following passage from Johannes de Caritate: "The eyn be þe thyrd part of þe body. And it behouyth hym þat wul haue helth on hys eyn, þat he defend hem fro dust, fro al maner of smoke, and fro alle aerys þat excede temperatnes of equalyté, owdyr in cold or hete, and fro euyl wyndis" (158). Johannes's eye health regimen is likewise preventative: avoid eye strain, excessive weeping, food like leeks and ale that create gross humors that go to the head, sleeping on a full stomach, and consorting with women, especially sexual intercourse (158-59). Gilles de Muisit's post-cataract-surgery regimen, as described by Wheatley, entailed staying away from light, garlic, wine sops, aged wine, sour food, broad beans, fire, and fumes (211).

²² Saving eyesight thus overlaps with the poem's well-developed laundry metaphor, another process which involves the removal of contaminant foreign material from an object. If reneying eyes is baptism, laundering clothes is penance. For laundry references in *Piers*, see the following lines in B: 6.175, 13.314, 14.18, 15.187, and perhaps also 18.391-92. Laundry imagery is common in medieval sermons, as Owst notes (35-36, especially 36n1).

²³ In their glossaries, the editors Kane, Pearsall, and Schmidt all leap quickly to the figurative meaning, to deceive or hoodwink, at this line. Pearsall makes the strong point that the pardoner is behaving as if it were a game of blind man's buff (47 note to line 72). Nonetheless the literal meaning is also relevant through its ironic inversion of the text's eyesight motif.

²⁴ What some of these maladies are is clear enough, but many might need some explanation for the modern reader. A *flux* is a watery discharge from any bodily orifice, but especially from the nose, the mouth, or the rectum. *Cardiacle* denotes heart trouble. *Rewmes* are head colds; *radegunds*, inflamed skin infections; *roynouse scalles*, rough, scabby skin; *biles*, ulcers, boils, or abscesses; *bocches*, plague buboes; and *foule eueles*, infected, gangrenous wounds or sores. Lines 97-98 of passus 20 refer further to sores, pocks, and pestilences.

²⁵ For some accounts of blood coming out of the eyes in miraculous cures of eyesight, see Wheatley (173-75). Putting blood in the eye features in some medical treatments of the time, as Wheatley also demonstrates. In the early fifteenth century, Thomas Fayreford "wrote that he cured a twelve-year old boy from Tiverton in Devon who had been completely blinded in one eye by a blow. Fayreford put swallow's blood in the damaged eye twice daily . . . and within fifteen days the boy recovered his sight in the eye" (189). Swallow's blood features as an ingredient also in "the writings of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, who recommends the use of blood from the right wing of a swallow to cure blindness in book 12, chapter 22 of *De Proprietatibus rerum*" (189-90). Infamous as the bird that defecated into Tobias's eyes, thus blinding him, the swallow was reputed in *The Bestiary* to have "some skill in healing, because if the young are threatened by blindness or their eyes are hurt, it possesses a means of healing by which their vision can be restored" (166). The swallow's reputation for healing eyesight likely explains its use in curative eye drops for vision problems. It perhaps also explains some of the medical recipes in the writings of Gilbertus Anglicus, such as using the blood of a lapwing or

swallow to temper the effect of strong corrosives on the eye, or a recipe in one particular manuscript of Gilbertus, Additional 30338, that “involved blinding a swallow with a needle and then burning it to powder (f.36)” (Getz 49, 297n60/15).

²⁶ Who speared Longeus’s eye(lid)s shut in the first place? One likely answer is Envy (cf. 16.136) who in the anonymous Middle English translation of Guillaume de Guileville’s immensely popular *Le Pélerinage de la Vie Humaine*, “Tweyne speres she had ficched and tacched in hire tweyne eyen” (*Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode* 105, lines 4395-96). The second spear is known as Joy of Others’ Adversity and because of it “kyng Ihesu hadde þe side perced: more harm þan dide him þe skorninge þat þe Iewes maden of his torment þan dide þe spere þat Longis putte in his side” (107, lines 4449-55).

²⁷ Langland uses several “undoing” verbs in quick succession at this point in the text: *vnspere* (18.86, 262), *vnloukeþ* (18.189, 258, 264, 316), *vnknytteþ* (18.215), *vnioynen* (18.258), *vnpyenneþ* (18.264), and *vndo* (18.319).

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